

"Help"
Psalm 46
Hebrews 4:15-16
Sermon Series: Three Essential Prayers
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The Holy Way Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 46 (CEB)

God is our refuge and strength,

a help always near in times of great trouble.

That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart,

when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,

when its waters roar and rage,

when the mountains shake because of its surging waves.

Selah

There is a river whose streams gladden God's city,

the holiest dwelling of the Most High.

God is in that city. It will never crumble.

God will help it when morning dawns.

Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.

God utters his voice; the earth melts.

The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety.

Selah

Come, see the Lord's deeds,

what devastation he has imposed on the earth—

bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,

breaking the bow and shattering the spear,

burning chariots with fire.

"That's enough! Now know that I am God!

I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!"

The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety.

Selah

Hebrews 4:15-16 (CEB)

Because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

D-I-Y. Do It Yourself.

This method for home improvement and maintenance and cooking and even clothes-making has been popular for decades now.

And social media has made it even more popular.

It is, in fact, pretty trendy right now to do things for yourself, and then to show the world. It's trendy to not need an expert to complete a task.

To have everything you need to get the job done on your own.

To be free of dependence on anyone else.

Now, if you want a good laugh this afternoon, go home and google "DIY fails."

I promise you--what you'll find is hilarious.

You'll see toilets taped to walls, ceiling fan blades that cut into the drywall around them, pottery projects that are hard to identify, Halloween costumes that are confusing, and my favorite--the Easter lamb cake that barely looks like the Pinterest picture from which it was modeled.

I wish I'd had it printed on the bulletin cover this week.

It's eyes are lopsided.

The grin is fairly creepy.

The whole scene is pretty grim, far from the joy of Easter Sunday!

Time and time again with these projects, the expectations don't match up with reality.

Sounds kind of like life, doesn't it?

We think life will go one way, and then it doesn't.

Or it *is* going one way and everything seems great...and then suddenly it's not.

Plans get derailed.

Relationships suffer.

People let us down.

Our bodies begin to fail us.

We need things we're not getting.

We find ourselves alone.

And in these difficult moments, in these times that really challenge us,
 we may find ourselves desperately wanting to reach out to God,
 to feel God's presence with us...
 ...but not know how.

What do we say to God in times like this?
 How do we know what to pray?

Author Anne Lamott believes in keeping prayer simple.

In her book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*,
 the book on which this three-week sermon series is based, she gives a little Prayer 101.
 She describes prayer in many ways, but all her descriptions of what prayer is can be
 whittled down to:

"Communication from one's heart to God."

She says to pray means that,

"in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone
 who hears us when we speak in silence" (p. 4).

It's that simple.

A conversation.

A relationship.

The book of Hebrews reassures us that we do have someone to which we can turn.

*"Because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses
 but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin" (4:15).*

Hebrews reminds us that we have someone we can turn to, just as we are.

It's that simple.

A conversation.

A relationship.

So we are invited to lean into what it means to pray to God, to communicate from our
 hearts. Lamott says,

"Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and
 chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may
 be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such
 miserable shape" (p. 5-6).

So as Hebrews reminds us, “let’s draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.”

Help.

Now that’s not the easiest thing to ask for, is it?

We all know the jokes about stubborn folks who refuse to ask for directions when lost.

We probably have at least one friend who no matter how stressed they become, absolutely will not ask us for help.

And the individuals epicly failing at their DIY projects??

I suspect they didn’t ask for help as things began to go sideways.

Asking for help is hard because it makes us feel vulnerable.

Because it puts us at the mercy of another.

Because we fear we might look weak.

Because we don’t want to be disappointed with the outcome.

I would suggest that the same is true when it comes to *praying* to God for help.

In our Do It Yourself culture, we are not good about praying this prayer to God.

And yet, Anne Lamott claims “Help” to be one of the three **essential** prayers.

“Help.”

It’s a simple, yet powerful way for our hearts to have an honest conversation with God.

“Help. Help us walk through this. Help us come through,”

she encourages us to pray, calling this the “first great prayer.” (p. 15)

“Help. Help us walk through this. Help us come through.”

We might pray this when we experience the death of our pet, or face the passing of a loved one.

We might pray this when we look around and see all of God’s beautiful creation groaning from misuse and abuse.

We might pray this when we experience the heartache that comes with changing relationships, ones sometimes on the verge of falling apart all together.

We might pray this when we live in a community rocked by violence and tragedy.

We might pray this simple, great prayer for so many reasons.

“Help. Help us walk through this. Help us come through.”

The Psalmist declares that,

***“God is our refuge and strength,
a help always near in times of great trouble.***

*That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart,
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,
when its waters roar and rage,
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves.”* (Psalm 46:1-3)

But do we trust this?

Can we believe this when we begin, or continue, a conversation with God?

Sometimes, as Lamott points out, we have to hit rock bottom before we can pray prayers as honest as “Help.”

Sometimes that prayer is only first cried out in our deepest desperation.

And that’s okay.

Our heart’s conversation with God can begin in whatever moment, in whatever way.

And it can begin with as little as one word--“Help.”

It can be that simple.

But then what? we may begin to wonder.

Because it’s easy to fall into the trap of overthinking what happens next after we utter that word.

It can be tempting to want to predict the answer that might come from God.

Or in other words, it’s tempting to still want control, even after we’ve prayed for help.

But praying “Help” should remind us we are not in control.

And that’s okay.

Lamott says,

“Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by something, some force, some friends, some *something*. These prayers say, “Dear Some Something, I don’t know what I’m doing. I can’t see where I’m going. I’m getting more lost, more afraid, more clenched. Help.

These prayers acknowledge that I am clueless: but something else isn’t.

It’s like the old riddle:

What’s the difference between you and God? God never thinks he’s you.” (p. 35)

For more than 25 years, Anne Lamott has used a tool that helps her let go in prayer. She uses what she calls “A God Box.”

Using whatever type of container that is big enough to physically put a note into it, this box serves as a way of seeing yourself let go, in time and space.

Here’s what she says she does:

“On a note, I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this:

“Here. You think you’re so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed.”

Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off the spaceship until I hear back.

The willingness to do such a childish thing,” Lamott shares, “comes from the pain of not being able to let go of something. The willingness comes from finding yourself mad with obsession. We learn through pain that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisms, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them, we can’t find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help in knowing which direction to face, you’ll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you’ll see at least one next right step you can take.

The response probably won’t be from God, in the sense of hearing a deep grandfatherly voice, or via skywriting, or in the form of an LED-lit airplane aisle at your feet. But the mail will come, or an email, or the phone will ring; unfortunately, it might not be later today, ideally right after lunch, but you will hear back. You will come to know.” (p. 36-37)

Friends, we come to hear God, to know God, when we begin our heart conversation with “Help.”

And as one priest says,

“Through prayer we take ourselves off the hook and put God on the hook, where God belongs.” (p. 19)

“So when we cry out Help, or whisper it into our chests, we enter the paradox of not going limp and not feeling so hopeless that we can barely walk, and we release ourselves from the absolute craziness of trying to be our own--or other people's--higher powers.” (p. 39-40)

In other words, we should pray “Help” and then “Let go, and let God.”

Because we weren't designed to do this all on our own.

Amen.